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Revision

Mental Health Parity Hearings Continue *Senate Committee hears more personal stories*

May 29, 2003-Yesterday, the Senate Health Policy Committee heard almost three hours of testimony on Senate Bills 4 and 5. The legislation, introduced by Sen. Beverly S. Hammerstrom (R-Temperance) seeks to end the discrimination of mental illness and substance use disorders under health insurance coverage by requiring health insurance providers to cover such conditions at the same levels as they cover physical illnesses.

The first individual to speak on Wednesday was Mrs. Waltraud Prechter, wife of the late Heinz C. Prechter, entrepreneur and founder of the American Sunroof Company as well as the World Heritage Foundation. Prechter committed suicide in 2001 after a life-long battle with manic depression, also known as bipolar disorder. Mrs. Prechter and her children established the Heinz C. Prechter Fund for Manic Depression and she has become an ardent advocate for the mentally ill at both the state and national level.

“Illnesses of the mind have been shrouded in fear, shame and misunderstanding for as long as man has walked the earth,” said Mrs. Prechter. “Even after 200 years of enlightenment and technological progress we have not seen a paradigm shift in how mental illnesses are medically treated and dealt with in society. The artificial, centuries-old separation of mind and body prevails.”

Wednesday’s meeting was the third time the committee has heard comments on this initiative and many brave individuals have come forward to talk about how the lack of insurance coverage for their conditions have reeked havoc in their lives that no one with insurance coverage would ever experience if they had a physical illness.

Judy Hutchins, a retired registered nurse from Ossneke, Michigan, also spoke on Wednesday. Diagnosed with severe chronic clinical depression, Hutchins discussed how effective mental health treatment can be and how it must be maintained similar to any chronic physical condition such as diabetes.

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“People do not choose mental illnesses. Mental illnesses are treatable. Many persons with these illnesses of the brain are the most creative and productive of our citizens when they receive adequate treatment,” said Hutchins.

The committee has yet to hear comments from any group or individual opposed to Senate Bills 4 and 5, despite interest groups proclaiming their opposition through the press and correspondence with law makers.

“The committee is interested to hear the rationale of the opponents’ positions,” said Hammerstrom. “I understand they are concerned about the rising cost of health insurance, as we all are, but there is data from over 35 states which demonstrates that any increase in cost is minimal and more than offset by increased productivity and less utilization of physical health benefits.”

The agenda for next week’s committee meeting on June 4, 2003 at 1:00 p.m. in the Boji (Michigan National) Tower Senate Hearing Room also includes Senate Bills 4 and 5. Ron Bachman, a national expert on cost issues surrounding parity, will make a presentation to the committee on the experiences in other states that have parity.

A photo of Mrs. Waltraud Prechter speaking at the committee meeting is available on the Senate photowire at: <http://www.senate.michigan.gov/gop/photowire/Hammerstrom>.